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A POTENT DROP

They're the first Australian band to ever debut in the UK Top 5 with a first release, an album which cost them more than \$400,000 to make. Their original drummer quit, claiming they were being manipulated by their record company. They've only ever played one show in Melbourne. And they're currently the biggest Australian band in the world. **SHANE O'DONOHUE** meets **THE VINES**.

By now you know the story: seven years ago, Craig Nicholls and Patrick Matthews — like thousands of other bored teenagers around the country — meet at an after school job at McDonalds, and pass the time between whipping up Big Macs with talk of starting up a band. But instead of relentlessly slogging things out on an overcrowded live scene, Nicholls (vocals, guitars) and Matthews (bass, vocals) rope in David Olliffe, a mate of Matthews' from school, to drum, and concentrate on writing and recording at home.

A few years later, with only a handful of live shows in hometown Sydney and one Melbourne gig to their name but armed with a swag of memorable rock songs recorded on four-track, the band — now known as The Vines — incite something of a bidding war. The lads sign a lucrative deal and fly to LA, where they get to work on recording their debut LP, *Highly Evolved*. In the meantime the British press — having run out of things to write about The White Stripes, The Hives and The Strokes — start salivating over The Vines, the band most notably earning two Single Of The Week gongs (for *Highly Evolved* and the limited edition *Factory 7*) in *NME* before the album has even been finished, but also winning praise from everyone from *Kerrang* to *The Face*. An *NME* cover story soon follows.

During the recording of *Highly Evolved*, however, drummer Olliffe flies back to Australia, unhappy with the direction the band is taking, telling the others he thinks they're being manipulated by their record company. On a brief trip back to Australia a replacement drummer, Hamish Rosser, is found after the group place a classified ad in Sydney street press paper *Drum Media*. Rosser's previous gig was apparently playing in a Kinks' cover band in Nevada. A childhood friend of Nicholls, Ryan Griffiths, is then added as a second guitarist. Meanwhile, Nicholls starts doing less interviews — adopting the persona of the enigmatic frontman — variously being described as a genius, completely bonkers, and often a mixture of the two.

And so that brings us up to last week, when The Vines notched up another milestone, becoming the first ever Australian group to debut in the UK Top 5 with a debut album, landing on the charts only behind Red Hot Chili Peppers and Oasis. With high rotation on MTV and appearances scheduled on the David Letterman and Conan O'Brien late night circuit over the next few weeks, a similar level of success in the US for The Vines can also be expected.

Matthews is in LA when I speak to him over the phone, the bass player at times still seemingly trying to make sense of an unbelievable twelve months (the band left Australia on July 11th last year, only coming back for a month or so over Christmas).

"I've stopped reading about us," Matthews says when questioned on the hype that has surrounded the band almost since they touched down in LA. "That *NME* cover happened really quick. I assumed we were going to be on the cover after the album came out. It's kind of a ridiculous situation where we've released two singles in England and we're on the cover. I found it a bit strange with the *NME* cover that our personalities are better known than our music. But it's a vote of confidence on their part."

If Matthews hadn't stopped checking out his own press, he'd have read that "Oz's finest prove they can rock skinny

enough to get indie girls wet" (*The Face*). "*Highly Evolved* takes *Bleach*-era Nirvana as its starting point and then proceeds to compress the whole of Kurt Cobain's career into a blistering minute and a half" (*NME*), "Less blustering than The White Stripes, less bombastic than The Hives, The Vines have hit on the sound of the summer three months early" (*Kerrang*), and that a Vines show "is like listening to all your favourite bands at once" (*Guardian*). But as we've seen before, what the British music press help create they can just as easily destroy, and while The Vines are still enjoying a honeymoon period in the UK, Matthews is conscious of the possibility of a backlash.

"I was assuming there might be one in Australia," he says, and while he's yet to hear of any particular local bands pissed off at the attention The Vines are getting on the back of so little live work here, he says, "I wonder if people would wanna do what we did. The whole thing is we came over here to make a record and that's all we did. And maybe if you wanted to come over to LA and party — LA's a pretty good party town — but if you think of it as leaving home and living with two people from your band — no one from bands ever gets along 100 per cent — I dunno, I wouldn't say that I deserve this but I've certainly worked for it."

It's just that, unusually for an Australian group, that work didn't take the form of hundreds of gigs on the local live scene.

"Part of that is that we never had anyone in the band who was an organiser, getting us shows or acting as a de facto manager," Matthews explains. "Part of the reason is that Craig was sort of obsessed by recording. I became a bit more into it after I saw what Craig could do but he certainly was the stimulus. He used to make these home recordings that sounded really good so I figured we should work out some way of recording our band... he was always one step ahead with recording."

It was after a couple of gigs the band played in Sydney though that Matthews first realised something special was going on. "There was this stage about three years ago we played two shows in a week, and that was the first time I really noticed there was a buzz. From then it took off a bit. There was... not a bidding war, but there was two record companies bidding for us. We managed to make a good amount of money to make this record. We were being promised like \$200,000 Australian to make the record, and that was a lot of money back then. In the end it cost twice that.

"But the real hype machine type buzz was when we got that *NME* single of the week and that was when I sort of knew that it was definitely going to happen. Because if they thought [the *Highly Evolved* single] was good... in my mind I didn't think it sounds that great. And if they were going to get behind that then I didn't think they were going to back off when we showed them what we'd recorded."

The recording was done in LA, over a period of roughly five months. It was during this time that Olliffe decided he'd had enough, packed up his things and flew back home.

"He went home after about eight weeks," Matthews explains, choosing his words carefully. "At that time it seemed like that was it, he wasn't going to rejoin. But then he got back to Australia and started saying he wanted



to play again. But then we wanted to go on tour and he didn't think he'd be capable. Anyway, then there was angst flying around the Internet. We can't really come to terms with him. He thinks we're being manipulated by the record company and we think he's being unreasonable. I don't know if he's not going to be the drummer anymore. We really have to see when we get back to Australia."

The scheduled return to Australia — and The Vines' first headline tour of this country — isn't until October, with the band booked to play a number of big festivals in Britain, as well as a huge headlining tour of the States.

"It's not going to be easy," Matthews says of the upcoming American tour. "We did a ten-day tour of the east coast in the US and that wasn't without incident. And that was

hardly gruelling; if anything, it was namby pamby. You look at some of the distances we have to drive — we're driving between San Diego and Phoenix in two days — it's a bloody long way. Everyone's just going to have to be calm on the bus."

Hang on a minute — what do the words 'wasn't without incident' mean?

"Ah, I can't really say," Matthews says slowly. "We had to cross a border and throw out some contraband and certain people don't like being without contraband and got a bit upset. If we cross any borders this time, we'll be having someone stationed just across the other side."

Highly Evolved is out now through EMI.